

THE USE OF KOREAN WOMEN'S MINDS, BODIES, AND HISTORIES FOR  
SOUTH KOREAN AND JAPANESE POLITICAL AGENDAS

by

Britney Nay

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
The University of Utah  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Asian Studies

College of Humanities

The University of Utah

May 2015

Copyright © Britney Nay 2015

All Rights Reserved

# The University of Utah Graduate School

## STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL

The thesis of **Britney Nay**

has been approved by the following supervisory committee members:

<b>Ronald Hrebenar</b>	, Chair	<b>03/13/2015</b>
<hr/>		<hr/>
		Date Approved
<b>Wesley Sasaki-Uemura</b>	, Member	<b>03/13/2015</b>
<hr/>		<hr/>
		Date Approved
<b>Mamiko Suzuki</b>	, Member	<b>03/13/2015</b>
<hr/>		<hr/>
		Date Approved

and by **Janet Theiss**, Chair/Dean of

the Department/College/School of **Asian Studies**

and by David B. Kieda, Dean of The Graduate School.

## ABSTRACT

Korean women's minds, bodies, and histories have been used by both the South Korean and Japanese governments to further national political agendas since the promulgation of women's education. Women's education was portrayed as necessary for the good of the nation in Chosŏn Korea, and they were to use their education to become better mothers and wives. Women were to give birth to more children in order to literally create and mold the next generation of good citizens for the nation. After colonization by Japan, Korean women were expected to learn the values and ethics of a good imperial subject, and to pass them on to their children. Although many women took advantage of their new opportunities for education, ultimately their bid for independence through education was redirected toward nationalist endeavors. Women's bodies were used as cheap sources of labor, and they often suffered abuse due to their inferior social status and inability to fight back against their oppressors. Finally, women's bodies were used for Japanese soldiers' sexual needs as Korean women were forced into sexual slavery under the comfort women system. These women suffered horribly in comfort stations, and were subjected to further pain and humiliation upon their return home, when many were rejected by their families for their supposed "defilement." The comfort women's stories have remained largely untold until the early 1990s when a more conducive social environment allowed many to step forward and finally tell their stories. Once again, however, they have been denied legitimacy, as the Japanese government initially refused

to admit to participation in the comfort system and to this day contests its involvement. Furthermore, the humanitarians that are helping the comfort women pursue acknowledgment and compensation are only interested in telling the worst stories in order to construct a black and white paradigm of Japanese cruelty and aggression. This is not bringing justice to the history and lives of all comfort women, but once again using women for a political agenda. Women, past and present, have suffered long enough, and their lives should not be rewritten to serve a political agenda.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
EDUCATION AND LABOR.....	4
Chosŏn Korea: Education and Women's Place.....	4
Women's Education in Colonial Korea and the New Woman.....	8
Women's Labor: Bodies for the Nation.....	19
The Chŏngsindae.....	27
THE COMFORT WOMEN.....	33
A Brief History.....	33
The Comfort Women and Korea.....	36
The Comfort Women and Japan.....	45
Recanting the Yoshida Seiji Articles and Dismissing Comfort Women's Testimony.....	50
CONCLUSION.....	60
REFERENCES.....	63

## INTRODUCTION

History is important. I doubt that many would argue this point, but few bother to remember it in times of crisis. Even fewer stop to contemplate how history affects current affairs and how history is appropriated for political agendas. History, as many have argued, is a moving target – it is relativistic. Different groups view the same historical issue or point in time from different perspectives, and accordingly, their recall of the event and the importance which they attach to it will be entirely different from, if not entirely opposed to, the recall of another group. In addition, oftentimes the tragedies of a set of victims will be used to further political agendas, forgetting the point of telling one's experiences: to validate the victim's pain and, if at all possible, ease it. Furthermore, political agendas also serve to muddy the waters of history and prevent a full understanding of the past, without which we cannot find reconciliation nor a path into the future.

Korea and Japan have a long and storied history of interaction; culturally, politically, and economically, they have both shared with each other and squabbled for as long as they have been in contact, with Korea viewing itself as “a neighboring nation that played the role of ‘big brother’ to Japan in the premodern history of the latter's cultural development.”<sup>1</sup> One might expect the two countries to share close relations politically.

---

<sup>1</sup> C. Sarah Soh, The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008) 15.

This is true to some extent, as the two operate as the closest allies of the United States in the Pacific region and are therefore tied together vis à vis their mutual ally. They also stand as two capitalist democratic countries facing the Communist forces of China and North Korea. However, the relationship between Japan and South Korea is notoriously tense and weighed down by history (Japan and North Korea share an even more harsh and unrelenting relationship, but as North Korea is a force unto itself in the world unlike any other country currently in existence, it shall be left out of this analysis). The memories of the colonial era and the war period cause strained foreign relations between the two East Asian democracies and have continued to be a source of friction in East Asia. Much vitriol has been spewed on both sides of the issue with regard to the colonization of the peninsula and the ongoing discussion of the comfort women used by the Japanese military in the Asia-Pacific War, a period which encompasses Japan's invasion of China following the Manchurian Incident and ends with Japan's defeat by the Allies.

South Korea has, since the end of colonization, utilized anti-Japanese sentiment to both create a nationalistic movement and to uphold legitimacy for its military regimes. Much of colonial history in Korea has been lost to the nationalistic discourse of Korean intellectuals and politicians who, in their quest to maintain power or win elections, have often ignored those parts of Korean history that make them uncomfortable or that complicate the issue. The Japanese government still attempts to elide parts of World War II from its history books and has offered insufficient apologies for atrocities committed during this period. The loser in all of this has almost always been women. The Japanese government certainly used Korean women for their own purposes throughout the colonial period, but that was not entirely new to women. From Chosŏn Korea on, women have



been oppressed by a patriarchal society created around Confucian ideals. While the Japanese used women's bodies and minds for their own political agendas, Koreans also participated in the system, and continue to perpetuate this use of women today. Women's lives, whether their newfound education during the colonial period, their labor for the colonial apparatus, or their time as military comfort women, are used by politicians today to further Korean nationalist agendas and to strengthen anti-Japanese sentiment among Koreans. The use of their stories in the discourse of today is not about the wide-ranging experiences of the women, it is about what their stories can do for the agenda. This is merely a continuation of the use of women's mind and bodies for state purposes, masked as an attempt to find justice for their suffering.

## EDUCATION AND LABOR

### Chosŏn Korea: Education and Women's Place

Korean women have not always been held to be so inferior to men. Prior to Confucianization of the peninsula, women in Koryŏ Korea had many rights and privileges. Women could serve as nuns and were revered as bodhisattvas. They could divorce, remarry, and inherit property. They could marry, or not, as they wished.<sup>2</sup> Koreans practiced uxoriocal marriage, with the newly wedded groom moving in with the bride's family.<sup>3</sup> However, under Yi Sŏng-nye (1335-1408), the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910) chose to restructure Korean society into a Confucian patriarchal hierarchy.

Under Confucianism, which was also transforming Japanese society during roughly the same time period, women were restricted to the inner quarters of the home and segregated from the opposite sex as much as possible. They were given the three obediences (*samjong chido* in Korean): obedience to their fathers before marriage, to their husbands after marriage, and to their sons after becoming widowed.<sup>4</sup> They were to be kept ignorant, according to the Confucian principle of *namhak yŏmang* (learned men,

---

<sup>2</sup> Theodore Jun Yoo, The Politics of Gender in Colonial Korea: Education, Labor, and Health, 1910-1945, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Yoo, 20.

<sup>4</sup> Yoo, 19-20.

ignorant woman),<sup>5</sup> and whatever little learning they might have acquired was learned “from the books read aloud by my father or over my brother’s shoulder.”<sup>6</sup>

The forced opening of Korea with the Treaty of Kanghwa in 1876 created an impetus for change in society at large, as well as in women’s education. Looking to the West and to Japan, Koreans saw women being educated and of an “equal” footing with men. This was, of course, equality in the sense of the times. Women were still expected to play their conservative role in the domestic sphere. Western missionary women, who would bring the beginnings of education to the women of Korea, were fairly cognizant of the shortcomings of their own societies. While Korean women exalted the “equal” status of Western men and women, one woman missionary commented on their misconceptions of Western society. Theodore Jun Yoo quotes:

First, she argued that they had an “exaggerated and mistaken” idea of the “woman’s sphere and her ideals” in the West. The “free and independent” Western woman whom they sought to emulate could only be found “in novels, the plays, the police gazettes, and on the world’s great globe trotting highways”...The second misconception was their view of progress, liberty, and civilization.<sup>7</sup>

Whether or not their perceptions were accurate mattered not to those who believed that women’s education would further the modernization of the nation. Many believed that “the low status of women was a symbol of national backwardness, so that raising their status through education and legal reforms would enhance the overall level

---

<sup>5</sup> Yoo, 39.

<sup>6</sup> Jiyoung Suh, “The “New Woman” and the Topography of Modernity in Colonial Korea,” Korean Studies 37 (2013), 16.

<sup>7</sup> Yoo, 54-5.

of civilization and strength.”<sup>8</sup> Women’s education, therefore, was viewed as a measure of “civilization” and “enlightenment.” The majority of men were not interested in educating women to place them on a truly equal footing.

Education was also a means for a woman to perfect her performance of her household duties. Yu Kil-chun states, “If women are feeble and have little knowledge, they will have little hope of being equal to the importance of their duties.”<sup>9</sup> An article in the *Tongnip sinmun* of 1899 laid out three reasons behind the importance of women’s education: “(1) the improvement of politics through husbands’ discussions with wise wives; (2) the beneficial development of the family through consultation with erudite wives; and (3) the existence of a ‘teaching mother’ who contributed to the education of her children before they enrolled in formal schooling.”<sup>10</sup> Women’s education, then, was to better serve men and the patriarchy in the customary quarters of the home.

Not all reformers believed that women’s education was simply to serve the nation, of course. There were some, like Sŏ Chae-p’il, who understood that men would resist the idea of unbalancing the hierarchy of power in society: “‘The life of a woman is not that inferior to men,’ because ‘men are not enlightened’ and only seek to use their physical strength to oppress women.”<sup>11</sup> Another reformer stated: “Wives are called helpers at home....Unfortunately, however, women are looked down upon...Wives are treated as bondswomen who cook rice, wash clothes, or go on errands. How can wives be called

---

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth M. Wells, “The Price of Legitimacy: Women and the Kūnuhoe Movement, 1927-1931” in *Colonial Modernity in Korea*. Eds. Gi-wook Shin and Michael Robinson. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) 198.

<sup>9</sup> Suh, 14.

<sup>10</sup> Suh, 17.

<sup>11</sup> Yoo, 43.

helpers of the home?”<sup>12</sup> These men were few, and not powerful. The majority of men only saw women’s education as a means to an end. It was the missionaries, though, who first began the process of educating women.

When Protestant missionaries entered Korea following its opening, they met with the intense seclusion of women. Women they encountered in the streets were likely to flee their gaze, and Horace Allen even wrote of a woman who died from an illness rather than violate her modesty by seeing him.<sup>13</sup> Over time, however, missionaries did experience success in getting women to attend their schools. Mary Scranton, the founder of the first girls’ school in Korea, stated that she must “get to the mothers before I can reach the daughters,” and knew that she must first instill a desire to learn in her prospective pupils.<sup>14</sup> Women became more interested in education and attendance at the missionaries’ schools and Bible studies grew. The pursuit of education was finally graced with the imperial blessing when Queen Min visited Mary Scranton’s school and renamed it Ewha haktang, thereby seeming to validate the endeavor.<sup>15</sup> Public opinion began to change with this visit from a member of the royal family, and missionaries and their mission were more accepted.

With the success of private missionary schools, interest began to grow in creating public secular schools. One organization, the Ch’anyang-hoe (Promotion Society) founded the first secular girls’ school, the Sunsŏng Girl’s School, in December 1898. Unfortunately, when the founders of the school submitted a memorial to the king asking

---

<sup>12</sup> Yoo, 43.

<sup>13</sup> Yoo, 46.

<sup>14</sup> Yoo, 46.

<sup>15</sup> Yoo, 49.

for recognition of their school, a conservative Minister of Education and his cabinet blocked any approval from the emperor.<sup>16</sup> Reformers might have believed that women's education was a barometer of civilization and modernity, but clearly the conservative government was not yet willing to attempt to elevate women out of their Confucian oppression. The school did open in the hopes that they would receive funding later, but they did not, and closed down a mere three years after opening, in 1901. The government would not open a public girls' school for higher learning until 1908, and even then few girls were qualified to enter.

Women were finally achieving some progress in acquiring education when the Japanese, having forced Korea to become a protectorate in 1905, issued a private school ordinance in 1908 requiring all private schools to adhere to governmental standards of education and obtain recognition. The expense and loss of freedom in choosing curriculum forced a large portion of private schools to shut down. Only a few received official government recognition. This opened the way for the colonial government, newly instated in 1910, to disseminate their own brand of education.

### Women's Education in Colonial Korea and the New Woman

Once again, under colonial rule women's education was used to further the aims of the nation. While missionary schools' curriculum had contained a wealth of subjects (arithmetic, geography, composition, and English, for example, along with many subjects pertaining to womanly pursuits and household matters),<sup>17</sup> the new Japanese curriculum

---

<sup>16</sup> Yoo, 53.

<sup>17</sup> Yoo, 49.

stressed moralistic behavior and loyalty to the imperial state. Shortly after the beginning of colonial rule, in August 1911, the colonial government issued Imperial Ordinance No. 229: “The goal was to inculcate ‘moral character and general knowledge’ in the younger generation of Koreans to make them loyal subjects of imperial Japan.”<sup>18</sup> According to Helen Kim as quoted by Theodore Jun Yoo, the new Japanese-imposed curriculum consisted of “137 lessons in morals... Out of these, fifty-eight lessons are on personality traits, such as patience, diligence, honesty, orderliness, faithfulness, and good manners.”<sup>19</sup> The Japanese colonial government, at least in the initial years, was less interested in educating Koreans for practical subjects and much more interested in inculcating blind loyalty to the empire and in correcting those poor traits they viewed as overwhelmingly present in Koreans.

Women’s education was to be focused on improving the “good wife, wise mother” of contemporary discourse. According to Jiyoung Suh, the “good wife, wise mother” contained three aspects: “(1) a good educator of the children; (2) an efficient administrator of the household; and (3) a supportive wife who had an equal partnership with her husband.”<sup>20</sup> Women were to be educated to this end, to be more effective helpmates to their husbands, and to correctly rear the next generation of Japanese imperial subjects. Furthermore, the creation of good, loyal citizens began in the home, and having an uneducated woman in charge of a child’s development could result in the

---

<sup>18</sup> Yoo, 61.

<sup>19</sup> Yoo, 68.

<sup>20</sup> Suh, 18.

perpetuation of “superstitions of the past.”<sup>21</sup> Mark Caprio quotes an article from a 1910 issue of the *Maeil sinbun*: “It is not an overstatement to say that women’s education is tied to the rises and falls of the state. If women do not have morals, then boys cannot be strictly directed. Without this foundation, it will be too late after to make him excel in his education.”<sup>22</sup> It is to be noted that the education of girls is not mentioned in this exhortation. The education of mothers was exclusively for the benefit of the *boys* they would be raising; the girls were irrelevant and would play their part when the time came for them to perform the same function.

This inherently presented a contradiction as women entered the public sphere and were told that their education would aim to create equality with men. What was advertised as an attempt to free women from the confines of the inner quarters and allow them social liberation was in actuality yet another method for the patriarchy to control women and relegate them once more to the private sphere.

In the first decade of Japanese imperial rule, most women did not seem to see this contradiction. New Women, at that time meaning women educated above a secondary school level,<sup>23</sup> rarely protested against the co-optation of women’s education by yet another patriarchal trope intending to utilize women’s minds to produce more male heirs and citizens worthy of the state. One of the few New Women to recognize the oppression inherent in the “good wife, wise mother” ideal was Na Hye-sŏk. She “denounced the idea of the ‘wise mother and good wife’ as a male-dominant ideology made to breed domestic,

---

<sup>21</sup> Mark Caprio, Japanese Assimilation Policies in Colonial Korea, 1910-1945, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 97.

<sup>22</sup> Caprio, 97.

<sup>23</sup> Suh, 25.



docile, and submissive women, one that would ultimately enslave them to societal patriarchy.”<sup>24</sup>

That is not to say, of course, that women were not actively participating in debates about the meaning and intent of the “good wife, wise mother,” or about women’s emancipation. However, liberation at this point meant “liberation from an old home and achievement of a new home”<sup>25</sup>; in other words, the liberation these women sought was merely the same repression with a new face. (It would be wise to take a moment here to mention that the vast majority of women participating in and contributing to these movements and debates were not of the lower class. That does not mean that lower class women were not conscious of their own repression, if not phrased as such.)

The idea of “women’s liberation” as “an awakening of modern gender consciousness” had begun to appear around the time of the March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1919 movement.<sup>26</sup> By the 1920s, women began to develop a more individualist perception of liberation. The Modern Girl, apart from the New Woman, began to emerge shortly thereafter. She differed from the New Woman, according to Miriam Silverberg, in that “the cerebral New Woman had been romantic rather than realistic; she had wielded ideals, not economics; she had imitated male habits instead of attempting to create a separately bounded life for women.”<sup>27</sup>

The first mention in the mass media of the Modern Girl was in a 1927 issue of the

---

<sup>24</sup> Suh, 19.

<sup>25</sup> Suh, 19.

<sup>26</sup> Suh, 19.

<sup>27</sup> Miriam Silverberg, Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) 58.

*Chosŏn ilbo*.<sup>28</sup> Suh points out that the image of the Modern Girl was almost a direct composite of all of the supposed negative traits of a New Woman, sharing qualities of “frivolity, shallowness, [and] carelessness.”<sup>29</sup> These women, these new Modern Girls, took the idea of liberation at its word and did not pay homage to the “good wife, wise mother” trope. They aimed for true social, political, and economic liberation and did not conform to the traditional image of a woman tethered to her family, which made them inherently threatening to men.

The Modern Girl also stood for things new and modern, and in an era of rapid modernization and industrialization at the hands of the Japanese colonial government, many Korean men clung to what was left of the traditional patriarchy. The loss of power to a foreign invader also caused a serious blow to men’s self-esteem and sense of masculinity. As Kenneth M. Wells writes:

Suffice it to say that the humiliation engendered by the Japanese removal of the traditional male elite’s prerogative to rule and the consequent subjugation of Korean men rendered them extremely sensitive to any suggestion of loss of prerogatives in the home, let alone any call for Korean women to assert themselves against Korean men.<sup>30</sup>

Men’s egos were at stake, and the repression of the colonial regime was passed on to the women. As Chungmoo Choi writes, “colonized males adopt the stance of the colonizer as a way of recuperating their masculinity.”<sup>31</sup> The Modern Girl further emasculated Korean

---

<sup>28</sup> Suh, 21.

<sup>29</sup> Suh, 21.

<sup>30</sup> Wells, 202.

<sup>31</sup> Chungmoo Choi, “Nationalism and Construction of Gender in Korea” in Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism. Eds. Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi. (New York: Routledge, 1998) 14.

men, and so she was torn down.

As the Modern Girl removed herself from the traditional home and entered the public sphere, she also removed herself from the last vestiges of control the male patriarchy could really exercise in society. To discredit the Modern Girl and regain some measure of lost control over women's bodies and behaviors, the Modern Girl was vilified and over-sexualized. Accused of excess promiscuity and vanity, she was disdained for her enjoyment of consumer culture. Furthermore, many speculated on her sexual exploits without proof; promiscuity was based upon her style of dress and mannerisms. Kitamura Kaneko mockingly sums up the hyper-sexualized perception of the Modern Girl:

She went for a walk with a man in Nara Park; I spotted a glimpse of her at a Dōtonbori café; she was kicking up her heels at the dance hall; I discovered her going into the movies. When I watched her walking she was moving her left and right legs one after the other; I saw her yawning and decided she was tired out from waiting for a man; she'd decorated her hat with a flower – I wonder who she got it from. She sneezed, she must be run down from being with a man; etc.; etc.; etc.; etc.; etc.; etc.; etc.; etc.<sup>32</sup>

While Silverberg and Kitamura are referencing Japanese Modern Girls, the same is true of their Korean counterparts. The activities described were common activities, yet they were still subject to the male gaze and interpretation. The Modern Girls did not conform to the socially approved idea of liberation and so they were treated as transgressors.

As mentioned above, men felt distinctly threatened by the potential loss of power in the domestic sphere should the women step onto the public stage. The answer was then to discredit her and her movement by labeling her licentious, unchaste, and unpatriotic. Chungmoo Choi writes: "When that threat comes from women, these women are

---

<sup>32</sup> Silverberg, 56-7.

relegated to the status of ‘whores,’”<sup>33</sup> which is exactly how the Modern Girls were treated.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to say if these women were truly guilty of all of the sins with which they were accused. Most likely they were not. As Kitamura is satirizing, many of the judgments made concerning Modern Girls revolved around innocent acts and the negative perceptions that came to be associated with the women themselves. Just because a woman wore a short skirt did not mean that she was sleeping around, though this is the linkage that was made in the eyes of many male spectators (women as well). Since the source material we have comes from witnesses to the phenomenon, and not from the Modern Girls themselves, we may never know what these women believed or wished to achieve for themselves. Their actions could just as easily have been politically motivated as they could have been an expression of pure self-interest, or both. According to many contemporary accounts, they were like “‘floating grass,’ with no political views but provocatively beautiful with their Western clothes and hairstyles.”<sup>34</sup>

Yet the Modern Girl was not the end of an awakening of political consciousness among the women’s liberation movement, despite her supposed lack of interest in politics or gender liberation. New Women began to call for actual, individual liberation. The backlash against women’s quest for equality took two forms: first, in a glorification of the Old-Fashioned Woman who had been tossed aside as ignorant and useless to the civilization project because of her lack of education at the beginning of Korea’s modernization; and second, in the subsuming of the women’s liberation movement under nationalism.

---

<sup>33</sup> Choi, “Nationalism and Construction of Gender in Korea,” 25.

<sup>34</sup> Suh, 21.

Society as a whole began to backpedal as New Women demanded more rights. The Old-Fashioned Woman, formerly a pitiable figure trapped in the darkness of the inner quarters, was talked of in a new light. A sense of nostalgia can be glimpsed in some of the commentaries and articles of the times as people attempted to revert back to a time when women demurely and obediently refrained from entering the public sphere where they could shake up the comfortable patriarchy. A 1926 article in the *Tonga ilbo* asked which contributed more to the family, the Old-Fashioned Woman or the New Woman. Three women took each side, and in the end, the paper's audience deemed the Old-Fashioned Woman to be the winner "in the long run."<sup>35</sup> These women were now the caretakers of the traditional values of "chastity, dutifulness, frugality, and sacrifice,"<sup>36</sup> traits which the Modern Girl conspicuously lacked. In a roundtable talk, in a confrontation between New Women and Old-Fashioned Women, each accused the other of exactly the traits with which the patriarchal discourse had labeled them. New Women attacked Old-Fashioned Women's "subordination to Confucian conventions and blam[ed] them for being mere sexual appendages to men."<sup>37</sup> Old-Fashioned Women fired back with New Women's "extravagance, vanity, clumsy housekeeping, and misbehavior that discredited promising men and caused family trouble."<sup>38</sup> Even in discussions among women about their own attributes and roles in society, a large portion of the debate was centered on their relations to men, allowing the invisible patriarchy to take a hand in the formulation of their own identities.

---

<sup>35</sup> Suh, 27.

<sup>36</sup> Suh, 22.

<sup>37</sup> Suh, 27.

<sup>38</sup> Suh, 27.

The patriarchy attempted another method of regaining control: a redirection of women's energy back into domesticity. The new buzzwords were "efficient" and "professional." To go along with women's new desire for education, domesticity was reformulated into a professional science, combining the modernity of New Women with the domestic virtues of Old-Fashioned Women. Whereas household work had previously been viewed as "drudgery,"<sup>39</sup> it was now characterized by practicality and efficiency: "She would be a *hyŏnmyŏng chŏnŏp chubu* (wise and prudent professional wife), motivated less by filiality than by common sense in meeting the practical needs of her nuclear family, especially the education and upbringing of her sons."<sup>40</sup> Hygiene and economy were prized in this discourse to create a new nonthreatening, professional housewife. As Theodore Jun Yoo states, "The application of bourgeois virtues like thrift, simplicity, hygiene, and knowledge of economics were critical to the professionalization of housewifery."<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, these attributes could be accessed even by the lower classes who, as Ch'ae Maria, an educated New Woman, believed, lacked the ability to attain higher education to live "rational or ideal"<sup>42</sup> lives as the middle class and elites could. While their current practices were of the previous era, these women could be educated on hygiene and proper housekeeping techniques and so through their domesticity access the supposed liberation that more educated women could achieve through other means.

Men returning from their studies abroad wanted women educated at the same

---

<sup>39</sup> Yoo, 85.

<sup>40</sup> Yoo, 85.

<sup>41</sup> Yoo, 87.

<sup>42</sup> Yoo, 86.

level. However, the subjects they learned were, of course, different. Women's courses focused on home economics. In regard to men's wish for college educated spouses, Jihang Pak notes, "In response to this demand, the home economics department was set up to prepare Ewha women as desirable brides by teaching them how to cook western food. Understandably, the department soon acquired the nickname of the department of the daughter-in-law."<sup>43</sup> Women were attending college to learn to be the equal and proper helpmates of their husbands in private while he performed as the power-holder in public.

Once again, women's role in the home was linked to nationalism. As earlier stated, women were to be educated for the nation when the idea of women's education first began to surface. It was a measure of the civilization of the country. Now that Korea was colonized, women's education and liberation would be used to uphold the nation.

Reformers once again preached that women were the source of good citizens, both in birthing new sons and in educating them in the home before sending them off to school. Keeping a clean and efficient household was part and parcel of this duty. Yoo writes, "...reformers sought to raise the ideology of housework to a higher plane, distinguishing it from the drudgery of the past and linking it to improvement in the nation's standard of living. In other words, the recreation of the nation was to start in the home."<sup>44</sup>

Nationalism and performing one's duty to the nation became ideological tools to restrain women's true liberation and keep them in the private sphere, where they might have as much power over the home as they liked.

Following the March 1<sup>st</sup> movement, nationalism gained a stronger hold over the population of colonial Korea. Liberation from the Japanese regime became the utmost

---

<sup>43</sup> Yoo, 88.

<sup>44</sup> Yoo, 85-6.

goal of nationalist reformers, and therefore, women's liberation movements had no place in the discourse. For these nationalists, "the call for female emancipation was a highly selfish act,"<sup>45</sup> distracting from the goal of liberation for the entirety of the Korean people. When newly educated New Women, such as Na Hye-sŏk, Kim Wŏn-ju, Kim Myŏng-sun, and other vocal women's liberation movement participants, had begun to step outside the bounds of the domestic "liberation" that had initially been allowed them, men reacted by attempting to suppress the changes they were demanding. Kenneth M. Wells notes,

Although social change was still desired, most Korean male activists felt obliged to resist the social changes that the colonial regime was effecting and became intolerant of women's movements that could not be readily used to discomfort the enemy or aid national liberation...the normal male reluctance to surrender traditional prerogatives over women was exacerbated by the perception – or reality – that under the colonial system women, unlike men, stood to gain from social change.<sup>46</sup>

The colonial regime gave women the opportunity for greater education and thereby greater social and economic power, albeit for the purpose of creating better imperial subjects, and this quite clearly disturbed Korean men. Add to that the oppression and degradation of colonization, and men felt quite stung by the idea of women attempting to wrest away their own liberation from the system.

The easiest way to halt women's liberation movements was to subsume them under the overall nationalist discourse. Kyeong-Hee Choi poetically writes, "Since then, far from having too little, Korean women perhaps have had too much of the nation. In fact, they have lost their face as women in order to wear the mask of nationality, only to

---

<sup>45</sup> Yoo, 79.

<sup>46</sup> Wells, 204.



find that in everyday life they must function only as women.”<sup>47</sup> Viewed as selfish and corrupt, women’s liberation movements were torn down and used by nationalist reformers for the reformer’s own purposes. “Nationalist reformers needed the support of the new women to promote a new patriarchy refashioned to meet the exigencies of the day”<sup>48</sup>; we therefore see the discourse of the housewife turned professional, efficient, and hygienically sound as well as the sudden trumpeting of the patriotism of these women.

In theory, women would experience liberation once the nation experienced liberation. They were essentially told to sit down, be quiet, and assist in the liberation of the nation instead of being overly concerned with their own personal freedom. Their education was not for them to make waves by vociferously entering the public fray, but to make them better able to help create the nation. Socialists took the same position, except they viewed the situation from a class perspective: “For the real struggle was not between men and women but between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. It would be hard to find a clearer dismissal of a feminist gender position.”<sup>49</sup> Women had little choice between the two; women’s liberation was not of concern to those creating the public discourse. Their education was not for them, but for the men of the nation.

### Women’s Labor: Bodies for the Nation

Having now discussed how women’s education, and therefore their minds, was to be used by the Japanese colonial government and by Korean men, it is important to

---

<sup>47</sup> Kyeong-Hee Choi, “Neither Colonial nor National: The Making of the “New Woman” in Pak Wansŏ’s “Mother’s Stake 1”” in *Colonial Modernity in Korea*. Eds. Gi-wook Shin and Michael Robinson. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) 223.

<sup>48</sup> Yoo, 93.

<sup>49</sup> Wells, 217.

discuss how women's bodies themselves were to be used. First, women were essentially the incubators of the people. They were to breed the next generation. Second, women were used for labor in the industrialization process and also in war materiel factories in the later years of the Asia-Pacific War; and third, which will be discussed at length in the last portion of this paper, women's bodies were used to "comfort" Japanese soldiers during the war years as "comfort women."

As has already been stated, women were to mold the next generation of imperial subjects. They were to cultivate their minds in the home, making the schooling children later received even more effective, in theory. However, it was not merely the shaping of young minds in which mothers were expected to take part; they were also the literal creators of those minds.

Women's purpose as a glorified incubator can be traced as far back as the national founding myth. The founder of Korea, Tan'gun, was supposedly the son of Hwanung, "the illegitimate son of Hwaning, the heavenly lord, and Wungnyŏ (which literally means a "bear-woman")."<sup>50</sup> Wungnyŏ, a bear, desired to become human so greatly that she lived in "a cave without sunlight and [ate] garlic for one hundred days"<sup>51</sup> as part of a test. Upon passing this test, Hwanung agreed to make her human, and she bore him a son: Tan'gun. The woman herself is only important in so far as she is the mother of Tan'gun, "suggesting that woman's only contribution to the creation of the Korean nation was the

---

<sup>50</sup> Seungsook Moon, "Begetting the Nation: The Androcentric Discourse of National History and Tradition in South Korea" in Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism. Eds. Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi. (New York: Routledge, 1998), 40.

<sup>51</sup> Moon, 41.

provision of a proto-nationalist womb.”<sup>52</sup> Wungnyŏ is also less than human: whereas Hwanung is descended from heaven, Wungnyŏ began life as a bear. From the very beginning of the nation then, according to this myth, woman was not of a level with man.

In the Chosŏn period, this inferiority of women was institutionalized in the patrilineal system. Women’s names did not appear in family registries, and many did not have given names.<sup>53</sup> A woman was listed only by the position she held within the family: “She would be listed in genealogies as the daughter of her father. Informally she would be known by her social position (new bride, daughter-in-law), by teknonymy (Suni’s mother), or geonymy (the girl from Pusan).”<sup>54</sup> All last names were according to the family surname (*sŏng*) and place of origin of the line’s originating ancestor (*pon’gwan*). This was a patrilineal bloodline relationship, and those with the same *sŏng* and *pon’gwan* could not marry, no matter how distant the kinship, because they purportedly descended from the same ancestor. Only those with the same *sŏng* and *pon’gwan* could be adopted into the household should the head of household not have a male heir. While families of younger brothers, etc., could branch off, they still retained the name of the bloodline, and villages often sprang up out of these partitioned households, as they remained nearby. It is noticeable that women did not factor into this at all. In Korea, they were not allowed to inherit a head of household position; there was always a son or an adoptee to inherit.

Although in the latter years of colonization the Japanese revised the Decree on

---

<sup>52</sup> Moon, 41.

<sup>53</sup> Clark W. Sorensen, “The Korean Family in Colonial Space – Caught between Modernization and Assimilation” in *Colonial Rule and Social Change in Korea: 1910–1945*. Eds. Hong Yung Lee, Yong-Chool Ha, and Clark W. Sorensen. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013) 325.

<sup>54</sup> Sorensen, 325.

Korean Civil Affairs to mandate the Korean adoption of Japanese surnames and therefore the Japanese *ie* household system, not much changed for the women. While Koreans were expected to maintain their family registers according to the Japanese *koseki* system, even as late as 1942 only about half had actually registered,<sup>55</sup> demonstrating Koreans' unwillingness to forsake their traditional method of organizing households and registries. The head of household system in Korea was further institutionalized in the postwar period by Koreans themselves, in the *hojuje* system, after Korea had been freed from the Japanese colonial presence, and was in fact not abolished until 2005.

Women's importance in the Korean patrilineal system was directly related to the men in their lives and dependent on whether or not they had born sons, and they had few rights of their own. Janice Kim writes, "A woman was not considered to be a permanent member of the household of her birth and, at best, obtained a secondary position in her husband's household after she bore a son."<sup>56</sup> She was of value only after she had proved her worth by birthing an heir.

Late in the colonial period, after the outbreak of war with China in 1937, the Japanese colonial government began stridently pushing for women to give birth to more children to boost the population. The Japanese Government-General instituted a policy of *umeyo fuyaseyo* (to give birth and multiply),<sup>57</sup> advocating women's production of more men for the empire. As with most countries, with the coming of war, citizens were encouraged to do all they could to assist the war efforts and to fulfill their duties as

---

<sup>55</sup> Caprio, 160.

<sup>56</sup> Janice C. H. Kim, "Gender, Labor, and Political Consciousness: Female Factory Workers in Colonial Korea." (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 2008), 61.

<sup>57</sup> Yoo, 88.

subjects. From things as simple as walking instead of taking the bus to their own personal health,<sup>58</sup> women were urged to do their duty. Advertisements “encouraged pregnancy and congenial family relations.”<sup>59</sup> Caprio gives an example of one such advertisement: “a group of women sitting in a circle contemplating getting pregnant by the end of February, their last chance to give birth to a son during the year of the tiger.”<sup>60</sup> Men born in that year would be “fierce fighters.”<sup>61</sup> The message is clear: women were to produce subjects for the empire, and more specifically, soldiers for the coming war efforts, their bodies merely fields for the sowing of seed. A Mother-Child Protection Law was then enacted in 1937. Officials became concerned over the falling birth rate, and subsequently, birth control was prohibited. Following this, in 1942, an Outline for Establishing Population Growth Policy was established. The woman’s reproductive system was now “under the ‘direct control of the state.’”<sup>62</sup>

Women’s bodies were also used for manual labor in factories. These women were not of the elite class and were rarely of the educated middle class, at least until the outbreak of war. The majority of them were poor and uneducated, coming from rural homes. The opportunity for work for pay outside the home was not one that they would have had prior to Japanese colonization. Rural women of course were not able to remain confined to the household as prescribed. They worked the fields and bartered in the marketplace, in many ways allowing them more freedom than their elite counterparts. As

---

<sup>58</sup> Caprio, 156.

<sup>59</sup> Caprio, 157.

<sup>60</sup> Caprio, 157.

<sup>61</sup> Caprio, 157.

<sup>62</sup> Kim, “Gender, Labor, and Political Consciousness,” 161.

Janice Kim points out, women labored in and around the home nearly constantly:

Korean peasant women generally made all the clothing in the household, prepared the meals, husked and cleaned the rice, carried “heavy loads on their heads,” and drew water in “remote districts works in fields”...In spite of the fact that womanhood and labor were separated in Confucian ideology, in reality, the Korean woman was “nothing but a drudge, until she could transfer her drudgery to her daughter-in-law.”<sup>63</sup>

Working in the factories at least provided an opportunity for wages. Some women went to the factories seeking economic independence, but most went in order to support their families. By leaving the household to obtain jobs, these women, young girls really, not only took the burden of providing for them off their parents’ shoulders, but they also supported the household from afar by sending back portions of their wages. Many also were working toward their own dowries.

Women’s entrance into the work force was not heralded by sudden equality in the workplace. Women more often than not entered highly gendered industries. Women were found overwhelmingly in the textile industry, where their “delicate and nimble fingers”<sup>64</sup> were more suited to tasks such as silk-reeling. The industrialists and the media frequently exalted such feminine traits as “patience, agility, sharpness, and endurance”<sup>65</sup> that enabled the women to perform the most tedious, repetitive, and labor-intensive work. They were praised in newspaper and journal reports on factory work, one reporter exclaiming, “Go and see for yourself...The female worker’s hand speed is unbelievable! You cannot follow their hand [movement] with your eyes! This requires dexterity!”<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> Kim, “Gender, Labor, and Political Consciousness,” 55.

<sup>64</sup> Yoo, 113.

<sup>65</sup> Yoo, 113.

<sup>66</sup> Yoo, 113.

Backbreaking work which could permanently disable workers with back and neck injuries was lauded as mere testament to the women's gendered skills. Women, as unskilled and therefore disposable labor, were often assigned the more dangerous tasks, such as sinking their hands in scalding water to catch at silken threads.<sup>67</sup>

Although women signed contracts before entering these jobs, the contracts were highly favorable to the company and gave them almost unthinkable power over the women. The wages that women were to receive for subjecting themselves to such dangerous and demanding work were used to control the women as they could be cut at a moment's notice. Wages were cut as penalties or if the quality of work was not up to par, which could easily be the result of faulty machinery.<sup>68</sup> Wages could also be held as part of a compulsory savings program, which women would never see if they left their contracts early. The end result was that the women had very little to live on, much less send back home to support their families. However, their work enabled the factories to continue producing at maximum profit, completely disregarding the health and wellbeing of its employees.

When absenteeism and breakage of contracts became a problem, the use of dormitories for workers increased.<sup>69</sup> Women shared extremely small spaces. Laundry and bathing facilities were frequently insufficient, even if they found time to wash themselves or their clothes. They were confined to the dormitories and were rarely allowed outside the compound, except to walk to work. They also suffered deprivations unique to women

---

<sup>67</sup> Yoo, 118.

<sup>68</sup> Kim, "Gender, Labor, and Political Consciousness," 95.

<sup>69</sup> Kim, "Gender, Labor, and Political Consciousness," 108.

as their menstrual periods were not taken into account. Given only two sets of clothes for the year, they were not provided undergarments as it was not necessary for the men, and therefore believed to be unnecessary for the women as well.<sup>70</sup> This meant that if women menstruated, they suffered the humiliation of bearing blood stains in front of their male co-workers and the discomfort of the dried blood. Women were able to smuggle supplies such as raw cotton into the dormitories from the factories, but were punished with beatings and penalties should they be caught.<sup>71</sup> Factory conditions were not always horrible, as testimonies of employees of the Fujikoshi Steel Company attest,<sup>72</sup> but the majority suffered tremendously in their jobs.

It is important to remember, however, that factory jobs were not the only type of labor that women entered into during this period. Women's education was open as never before, although only fifty percent of the school-aged population ultimately attended school by 1940.<sup>73</sup> Due to this education, women were able to enter other portions of the job market, like the service sector where many worked as clerks, waitresses, etc. Some worked as maids or domestic servants.<sup>74</sup> Whatever their job, these women gained the opportunity to strike out on their own and become economically independent. The experience they gained proved invaluable later in life. The depiction of working class

---

<sup>70</sup> Kim, "Gender, Labor, and Political Consciousness," 110.

<sup>71</sup> Kim, "Gender, Labor, and Political Consciousness," 111.

<sup>72</sup> Janice C. H. Kim, "The Pacific War and Working Women in Late Colonial Korea." Signs 33.1 (2007), 94-5.

<sup>73</sup> Sarah Soh, "Aspiring to Craft Modern Gendered Selves," Critical Asian Studies 36.2 (2004), 184.

<sup>74</sup> Soh, "Aspiring to Craft Modern Gendered Selves," 185.



women during the colonial period in Korean nationalist history, however, is overwhelmingly of those factory girls who suffered at the hands of industrialists (though the industrialists discussed are Japanese, and the Korean industrialists who equally took advantage of those women are not mentioned). While their suffering deserves recognition, it is not the only story in this history.

### The Chōngsindae

Following the Manchurian Incident, women began to move into heavy industries in which they had been scarce before, industries such as chemicals, mining, machines, and machine tools, working for companies such as the aforementioned Fujikoshi. While these industries had previously been deemed too labor intensive for women, who were more valued for their reproductive capacity anyway, with men moving into “large scale highly sophisticated heavy industrial factories,”<sup>75</sup> positions opened up for women in the unskilled labor portions, which they then filled. After 1937, women also began filling skilled jobs as well as clerical positions in heavy industries.<sup>76</sup>

Soon, even having an increasing number of women in the workforce proved insufficient in the face of wartime needs. The colonial government began recruiting students around 1938, with one of the first recorded recruitment projects being the Task concerning the Establishment of Labor Duties for Students.<sup>77</sup> Immediately before the attack on Pearl Harbor in December of 1941, the national registration system was enacted

---

<sup>75</sup> Kim, “Gender, Labor, and Political Consciousness,” 162.

<sup>76</sup> Kim, “Gender, Labor, and Political Consciousness,” 162.

<sup>77</sup> Kim, “The Pacific War and Working Women,” 88.

in November of that year. Men between the ages of sixteen and forty were registered, as well as unmarried women between sixteen and twenty-five; the women were never drafted, though.<sup>78</sup> It was not until 1944 that a plan was put in place to utilize women's labor more efficiently: the Woman's Volunteer Labor Corps was created.

The word for the labor corps in Japanese is *Teishintai*, meaning "voluntarily submitting or offering" (*tei*) "body" (*shin*) "corps" (*tai*). The Korean direct translation is *chōngsindae*. The full name was *Yōja Kūllo Chōngsindae*.<sup>79</sup> The corps was voluntary, as the name implies, and unmarried women aged twelve to thirty-nine were eligible. The corps was not the first time the term "*chōngsin*" had been used, though. According to C. Sarah Soh, "Originally, this particularistic term Chōngsin, conjuring up the spirit of patriotic sacrifice, was used to refer to a variety of ad hoc organizations of students, farmers, housewives, and other ordinary citizens, whose members were mobilized to support the war efforts of Imperial Japan."<sup>80</sup> So the idea of a patriotic sacrifice was not new to the women being called upon to serve. In fact, many women did view admission into the corps exactly how it was promoted. Yu Kwangnyōl "argued that young women called to become volunteers should consider the offer 'honorable,' since the group represented the best qualities of 'model employees' and patriots."<sup>81</sup> While a group seeking educated young women of the middle class may have been what was advertised,

---

<sup>78</sup> Soh, "Aspiring to Craft Modern Gendered Selves," 179.

<sup>79</sup> Soh, "Aspiring to Craft Modern Gendered Selves," 179.

<sup>80</sup> Soh, "Aspiring to Craft Modern Gendered Selves," 179.

<sup>81</sup> Kim, "The Pacific War and Working Women," 90.

in reality, standards of admission were low and almost all comers were accepted.<sup>82</sup> Once again, the use of women's bodies for labor is depicted as patriotic duty to the nation.

By 1990, however, with the foundation of the Korean Council, the term *chōngsindae* lost its precise meaning and has now become associated with the comfort women. The term *chōngsindae* in actuality refers solely to those women drafted under the 1944 Ordinance on Women's Volunteer Labor Corps. Women did join movements before, such as the Patriotic Labor Corps, but these women would not have been *chōngsindae*.

There are a variety of reasons as to the cause of this unwanted word association, beginning with the factory girls of prewar colonial Korea. Due to the extreme disparity in power relations on the factory floor, the occurrence of sexual harassment or rape by factory managers and foremen was high: "male managers often seduced or raped the young girls, and for many this resulted in miscarriages, abortions, or stillbirths."<sup>83</sup> Factory workers had no one to turn to. The police who should have protected them often did nothing or punished the victim. Those who did speak up were publicly humiliated. Few cases ever ended in the victim's favor.<sup>84</sup>

Reports of this abuse abounded. It is no wonder that the public grew deeply suspicious of the safety of the factories: "The general public sentiment was that young girls lost their virginity and honor to the factories. Factories were becoming synonymous with sexual slavery."<sup>85</sup> To this day, as Soh remarks, the use of the term *chōngsindae* to

---

<sup>82</sup> Kim, "The Pacific War and Working Women," 90.

<sup>83</sup> Yoo, 136.

<sup>84</sup> Yoo, 136.

<sup>85</sup> Yoo, 145.

refer to comfort women “reflects but also has reinforced the depth and strength of lingering suspicions on the part of Koreans about the abuse of Chōngsindae as a convenient mechanism to deceptively recruit comfort women.”<sup>86</sup> It is in the vein of an oft-repeated story that has become truth in the public consciousness. Like the myth that a cricket chirps by rubbing its legs together (it rubs its wings), the idea that the *chōngsindae* were frequently deceived into becoming comfort women or were in any way comfort women has permeated public discourse on the comfort women issue.

Yet, there is some truth to the tales. While evidence of *chōngsindae*-turned-comfort women is hard to come by, there have been a few to come forward. In her study of more than one hundred cases, C. Sarah Soh found only two that could be labeled “real” *chōngsindae*-turned-comfort women.<sup>87</sup> Even the presence of one, however, lends some truth to the matter and supports the discourse.

Finally, though one of the founders of the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (shortened to Korean Council), Yun Chōng-ok, has said, “But there existed the Chōngsindae that only labored and had nothing to do with sexual matters... When we speak of Chōngsindae to mean military comfort women, we cause a considerable trouble to them,”<sup>88</sup> the term continues to be used officially by the organization. It is claimed, though, that the term represents cultural sensitivity toward the survivors. The word that most accurately represents comfort women, *wianbu* (the Korean translation of the Japanese term *ianfu*), is deemed unsuitable as it evokes “[a] negative

---

<sup>86</sup> Soh, “Aspiring to Craft Modern Gendered Selves,” 182.

<sup>87</sup> Soh, The Comfort Women, 58.

<sup>88</sup> Soh, “Aspiring to Craft Modern Gendered Selves,” 182.

image of prostitutes.”<sup>89</sup> *Wianbu* also refers to the prostitutes in South Korea who are currently servicing the American military personnel. In order to distance these former comfort women from the profession of prostitution, the Council adopted the term *chǒngsindae*, despite its inaccuracy.

For the women who worked solely as *chǒngsindae* in the true sense of the word, this “cultural sensitivity” is not very sensitive at all. These women have been “doubly wronged.”<sup>90</sup> Not only did they suffer under the colonial regime, but now their identities are being snatched away from them, lumping them in with a category for which they feel shame. Comfort women have historically had a difficult time in postliberation Korea, although “difficult” might be an understatement. As will be discussed later, the comfort women were shunned and viewed as defiled when they returned home. Coming from this era, these women do not want to be associated with something they view as shameful. When filing a lawsuit against Mitsubishi Heavy Industry, the women chose to hide their names and their faces to avoid being associated with the comfort women.<sup>91</sup>

This is another instance of the women’s narrative being adjusted to fit with a political agenda. The term *chǒngsindae*, now equated with the deception and forced recruitment of comfort women, evokes greater international feeling and support for the comfort women’s cause than if they had merely been mostly voluntary labor. Those who attempt to point out the flaws in this terminology are summarily ignored, or silenced. When Jee Man-wŏn, a military analyst and conservative critic, accused the Korean

---

<sup>89</sup> Soh, “Aspiring to Craft Modern Gendered Selves,” 182.

<sup>90</sup> Soh, “Aspiring to Craft Modern Gendered Selves,” 182.

<sup>91</sup> Soh, “Aspiring to Craft Modern Gendered Selves,” 183.

Council of the “crime of distorting history”<sup>92</sup> and of possibly misappropriating funds, the Council responded swiftly: a legal battle ensued and a petition was begun to aid the “true” *chōngsindae* survivors.<sup>93</sup> However good-intentioned the appropriation of the term *chōngsindae* in the comfort women narrative may be, misusing the term is not only an injustice to the histories of the comfort women themselves, but also to the real *chōngsindae*, in the original sense of the term.

Having now discussed at length the appropriation of women’s minds and bodies for the purposes of the colonial government and the pre-existing Korean patriarchy, and concluded with the conflation of the terms *chōngsindae* and “comfort woman,” it is time to focus more acutely on the comfort women themselves, one of the largest and most visible of the historical issues that continue to loom over the relationship between South Korea and Japan. The remaining portion of this paper will be dedicated solely to these women.

---

<sup>92</sup> Soh, The Comfort Women, 231.

<sup>93</sup> Soh, The Comfort Women, 231-2.

## THE COMFORT WOMEN

### A Brief History

Korean men were used as labor and as soldiers, while Korean women were used as labor in factories and as “comfort women,” exploited during the war as a race below the Japanese. There is no question that the comfort woman system existed; the dispute lies in where blame lies for the heinous system and exactly how much blame the perpetrators should carry. Before broaching the complicated ongoing debate and political repercussions of the comfort women system between South Korea and Japan, one must understand the origins of the system itself.

Comfort women stations sprang up as early as 1932,<sup>94</sup> long before the Asia-Pacific War began. They proliferated following the Nanjing Massacre in 1937-38, springing up wherever Japanese soldiers went. Documentation has been found by Professor Yoshiaki Yoshimi of Chuo University that the military and the Japanese government collaborated to bring these comfort stations into being<sup>95</sup> on the theory that they would prevent a reoccurrence of such scenes of mass rape and murder as were witnessed in China. As men *needed* to have sex and expend sexual energy, especially following the adrenaline rush and fear after a battle, it was only logical that the military

---

<sup>94</sup> Yoshiaki Yoshimi, Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II. Trans. Suzanne O’Brien. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) 45.

<sup>95</sup> Yoshimi, 45-6.

provide its men with a means to satisfy that basic primal urge. It would also, it was believed, prevent the spread of venereal disease among the troops, which could potentially cut down significant numbers of men and officers for lengthy periods of time. Neither of these aims was actually achieved, as soldiers continued to rape where they could and venereal disease continued to spread. It is an incredibly blind assumption to believe that attempting to confine sex to certain designated partners would prevent sexually transmitted diseases, as the men were more often the transmitters as they moved from station to station and woman to woman. It was also naïve to believe that the men confined their sexual activities exclusively to the comfort stations, which were usually fairly expensive for a common soldier's monthly salary. Nevertheless, the number of comfort stations grew, many of them springing up close to the forefront of battle.

Conditions for the comfort women steadily declined as the war progressed and Japan lost ground. Women who had previously been somewhat removed from the battleground were moved closer to the action, putting their lives in danger along with the soldiers they were forced to service. When the war finally ended and Japan was defeated, many women found themselves abandoned in a foreign land. Hwang Kŭmju recounts her abandonment:

One evening there was no call for supper. There seemed to be nobody around, and it was strangely silent...There was not a single human being in sight. Then, as I was drinking some water a soldier appeared. He said he had returned after he had been sent on an errand to some far away, remote mountain, only to find the unit deserted. He said he had been left a memo from his officer telling him to leave this place immediately.<sup>96</sup>

Some were massacred as the Japanese troops fled. Soh describes the treatment of

---

<sup>96</sup> Keith Howard, ed. True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women. (New York: Cassell, 1995) 77.



specifically non-Japanese comfort women, as the Japanese women were informed and moved along with the troops where the others were not and were instead left to their fates or killed: “Many Korean comfort women were simply abandoned, and it has been reported that in some extreme cases the retreating Japanese army killed the women by driving them into trenches or caves where they bombed, burned, or shot them, creating mass graves on the spot.”<sup>97</sup> In some cases, then, the abandoned were the lucky ones. Whether the Japanese killed these women to cover their tracks once the enemy forces had breached their lines, knowing full well that the kidnapping and coercion of women as sex slaves defied international law, or they simply did not wish to have the added burden of women following as they fled, their treatment of the Korean (and Chinese and other ethnicities) comfort women speaks to their disregard for those women.

This disregard for the humanity of the women was not something new as the Japanese army broke down. From the beginning, the women’s movements had been recorded on transport lists as “munitions” or “canteen supplies.”<sup>98</sup> As women, and specifically as non-Japanese women, they did not even register as people, but as simple supplies for the troops’ needs. The women were transported like munitions and then were used as munitions, more often than not beaten, raped, and assaulted with deadly weapons, suffering permanent damage to their bodies and their minds, and were then left to fend for themselves in foreign, war-torn territories. The tragedy did not end with liberation, however. The women suffered upon their return home as well.

---

<sup>97</sup> Soh, The Comfort Women, 141.

<sup>98</sup> George Hicks, The Comfort Women: Japan’s Brutal Regime of Enforced Prostitution in the Second World War, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994) 83.

### The Comfort Women and Korea

In Korea, Korean women's compatriots were eager to ignore the former comfort women at best and to denigrate and shame them at worst. Many of the women returned home to find themselves shunned for their "defilement" regardless of the coercion employed. Any discussion or admission of the violence they suffered could result in ostracism from their family. As Keith Howard points out: "To the Koreans around them, they were neither faithful nor chaste. They were not exemplary women. The families of comfort women feared the ostracism they would suffer if the shameful past was discovered; the women became an extra burden, and there was little chance to marry them off."<sup>99</sup> The women's pain was ignored as their objectification as men's damaged property was more important than their physical or mental suffering.

As mentioned earlier, Korea has a long past of patriarchal domination and repression stemming from Confucianism. To reiterate, under Confucianism, women are reduced to the three obediences: "obedience to the father as a daughter, obedience to the husband as a wife, and obedience to the son as a widow."<sup>100</sup> Women were held under the heel of some man for the duration of their lives, never independent, never able to make their own decisions regarding their bodies or their lives; the only power they wielded was the influence they might have over their sons and husbands. They were confined to the inner quarters where possible and rarely had interaction with those outside of their immediate family. Once they were married, they were expected to bear out any abuse they suffered and not return to their natal home. Those women who did attempt to return

---

<sup>99</sup> Howard, 7.

<sup>100</sup> Soh, The Comfort Women, 71.

home were called *hwanghyang nyō*, a term which initially referred to women who returned to Korea after being sent as tributes to China and Manchuria,<sup>101</sup> further connecting their shame with the dereliction of a woman's perceived duty and loyalty to her household.

The patriarchal structure of the Korean Confucian household transformed a woman's body and chastity into the property of the man of the house, and therefore, any violation of a woman's person was viewed as a violation of the man's property, and the woman's individual personhood denied. The woman's pain and suffering were totally disregarded and instead, many women were thrown from their homes for bringing shame to the house. When Mun Okchu returned home, she was almost immediately rejected by her family: "I had only been back a short while when my aunt by marriage – my uncle's wife – visited and said they couldn't allow someone like me to stay at home and disgrace the family. I was not treated as a human being by my relatives."<sup>102</sup> Stories like these are not uncommon and demonstrate Korean society's overwhelming concern with chastity and reputation. The families of the victims did not care what tortures the former comfort women had suffered, only that their bodies had been defiled, and that they therefore brought shame to the family.

Most of the women never married, could never have children, or suffered in their married life, often from the abuse of their husbands, or the men they were living with. Mun P'ilgi said of her companion: "He drank every day. He caused me much mental pain. He had already been married, and had children, but he initially kept this a secret from me.

---

<sup>101</sup> Soh, The Comfort Women, 4.

<sup>102</sup> Howard, 113.

I tried to leave him many times, but always in vain. We lived together without getting married, and in the end he died of an illness, leaving me just his debts.”<sup>103</sup> Some were mentally or physically abused by husbands who knew their backgrounds. Even those who ended up with families and a generally well-off life felt the lack of support from their relatives. Kim Tökchin (a pseudonym for Kim Sun-dök, who later identified herself under her true name) stated in her interview:

I went to one of my nephews, my brother’s son, a high school teacher, whom I had helped to educate. I told him about my past and asked if I should register at the Council. He said “You know how the case of the Survivors Association of the Pacific War led to nothing. You will only bring trouble on your family and your children will be traumatized.” He pleaded with me not to register. I discussed the matter with another nephew living in Taejŏn. He wept as he listened to my story and advised me not to register. He said “It will break your son’s heart. What will your stepson in the United States say when he hears all this?”<sup>104</sup>

Even these men, whom Kim felt close enough to that she could share her woe, urged her to conceal her experiences to avoid the mental trauma and social stigma it would bring her family. Kim ultimately decided to register with the Council and tell her story as she had been unable to sleep since hearing the story of the first comfort woman to step forward, Kim Haksun, and had been suffering from the need to tell her story. Naturally, this lack of support from family members and those around her would be discouraging for any woman who might feel compelled to discuss her experiences as a comfort woman. As George Hicks wrote, “Given the moral value attached to chastity, the comfort women invariably emerged from their wartime experiences defiled, yet unable to accuse their abusers...From the patriarchal point of view, it was seen almost as a kindness to the

---

<sup>103</sup> Howard, 87.

<sup>104</sup> Howard, 49.

comfort women to pretend that this systematic brutalisation had never taken place.”<sup>105</sup>

Although women’s status has slowly changed over the years, there are still overtones of patriarchal dominance in modern society, as seen above in the nephews’ concern more for the effect of Kim’s story on Kim’s sons, and less for Kim’s continuous suffering. There is still some reticence to discuss the comfort women issue outside of an extreme, anti-Japanese, postcolonial rhetoric. The Korean state itself has found it particularly difficult to face up to its own history and involvement with the comfort women issue until recent years; even then, collaboration is rarely discussed, and the patriarchal repression that led to the problem in the first place is certainly never aired in public.

A significant number of the comfort women’s stories include a Korean procurer for the Japanese, whether s/he be a family friend, a relative, village headman, or a complete stranger. Some women were sold to pay off debt. Many of the private station owners were Korean and sold their own country-women into sexual service. The Korean state would like to portray the Japanese as the sole perpetrators of the comfort women system, but this is a whitewashed view of Korean participation in the system. That is not to say that all of the Koreans involved were money-grubbing or simply out to benefit from the misfortune of others in the midst of a war. Due to the colonization of Korea and the Japanese stranglehold on the police and nearly every aspect of the Korean economy, few had other options. However, this does not detract from the fact that the state and its citizens were indeed involved in the detainment of women as sex slaves and profited from the comfort stations. This does not fit in with modern Korea’s nationalist narrative and vitriol against Japan for acts committed during colonization and war, and so Korean

---

<sup>105</sup> Hicks, 21.

involvement is glossed over in nearly all discussions of the comfort women.

Another aspect that is rarely mentioned is the women's agency. In many cases, the women left home because they were repressed by the male figures in their lives. Mun P'ilgi wanted an education. The one time she attended school and her father found out, he "rushed into my classroom, dragged me home and burnt all my books...He beat me and threw me out of the house, and I had to stay at my uncle's for a while."<sup>106</sup> As Mun later states, "If I had been a boy I would have been able to study as much as I wanted."<sup>107</sup> Mun was enticed to leave home by a Korean recruitment agent of the Japanese when he offered her the chance to receive an education. In a rural society in which a woman's education was viewed as useless and leading to disobedient thoughts, Mun's desire to receive an education was actively curbed by her father, and as a result, she took what she thought was her only opportunity for independence and escape from the hard manual labor of a rural farmer. The agent's offer of a place to earn money and educate herself never materialized, and Mun found herself trapped in a comfort station.

In other cases, women were attempting to escape abject poverty. Most of the comfort women came from the lower classes, the extreme poor, and were seeking a way to earn money for their families or for themselves. They were therefore easy targets for promises of employment. The point here, however, is not just that the women were deceived, which has been the prevailing take away from the comfort women's stories; what has been ignored in Korean society are the circumstances the women lived in that forced them to leave their homes in the first place. In a modernizing society, through forced modernization by the Japanese colonial overlords, Korean women witnessed some

---

<sup>106</sup> Howard, 80-1.

<sup>107</sup> Howard, 81.

of the freedom that existed for women outside of the so-called “Hermit Kingdom.” They were striving to achieve that independence and self-determination for themselves, pushing against the Confucian bounds that had been placed around women. Blame does not lay at the door of these women who were simply seeking better lives for themselves; blame lies with the society that created situations in which they were susceptible to victimization by recruiters.

As with the comfort women, quite a few Korean brothel owners found themselves back in desperate straits at the end of the war. C. Sarah Soh lists a few testimonies by Korean women describing how they suffered when Japan lost. One female brothel owner in Taiwan lost all of the money she had earned when she returned home, stating, “I feared the retaliation of the Taiwanese.”<sup>108</sup> Another woman was beaten and robbed by the Chinese, despite having paid off her debt and escaped her comfort station to start her own small business. This woman had done nothing to the Chinese, but she was a Japanese imperial subject, and so in the eyes of those who attacked her, she was the same as the Japanese who had plundered their country. In the same way, a woman by the name of Ha Yǒng-i was robbed by the Indonesians. She had been a comfort woman who married the proprietor of the station where she labored. Therefore, she not only suffered through coercive recruitment and forced sexual labor as a comfort woman, but she was also victimized by the Indonesians in retaliation for a system in which she had also suffered.<sup>109</sup> These women, despite having been kept under the heel of Japanese rule, were still associated with the Japanese Imperialists at the end of the war. In the case of those who had also been comfort women, they were victimized twice over, and then a

---

<sup>108</sup> Soh, The Comfort Women, 206.

<sup>109</sup> Soh, The Comfort Women, 206-7.

third time when they returned home to the degradation of being labeled a collaborator or a comfort woman.

These are truths that are hard to bear for the Korean side of the issue, and as such are rarely mentioned in public discourse. The failure of the South Korean government to discuss alternative narratives in the lives of the comfort women removes these women's agency because ultimately, it is not the woman who matters, or her story or her pain, but the men of Korean society and how the issue reflects on them. In other words, gender matters to the driving nationalism the comfort women narrative has created in so far that women's voices do not matter unless they are serving a political agenda for the men.

Furthermore, until recently, South Korea was under a constant military regime, first under Syngman Rhee from 1948 to 1960, then under Park Chung-hee from 1961 to 1979, and finally under Chun Doo-hwan from 1979 to 1988. Many of those in these governments were themselves collaborators under the Japanese colonial government who had retained power following military coups, and were less than interested in punishing fellow collaborators or opening themselves to possible repercussions. It was far more important to build national legitimacy for regimes that had no inherent legitimacy and to create a nationalism that would allow the state to drive the populace as needed to push through its reforms. As South Korea was in the process of restructuring itself post-Korean War and building an economy to enter the top ten of the world in less than fifty years, dealing with the fallout of World War II and the comfort women was not considered. In addition, as South Korea (and many other Asian countries) received and are currently receiving developmental financial aid from Japan following the Treaty on Basic Relations of 1965, they have been reluctant to cause any turbulence in the relationship



with their benefactor. For these reasons, the government resolutely ignored the comfort women issue. It is only with the arrival of democracy in Roh Tae Woo's presidency in the early 1990s that these long-suppressed issues have been able to come to national prominence.

Those who now raise the specter of Korean collaboration or, more importantly, of any form of kindness or affection between the Japanese soldiers and the comfort women, in the face of rampant anti-Japanese nationalism, are shouted down by the Korean Council and other activist supporters. For example, Kim Sun-dŏk was taken to Japan in the early 1990s to give testimony. While there, she sought out Izumi, an officer she met while working as a comfort women (full story below). Her actions showed a level of affection for the Japanese soldier who had used her for her sexual services that the Korean Council found to be "embarrassing."<sup>110</sup> She was subsequently not asked back on any return trips to Japan.

The memory of Korean collaboration and repression and Japanese kindness does not fit well with the paradigmatic story the humanitarian activists are trying to tell. That story is a black and white tale of debauchery and violence, with no saving graces for the Japanese who participated in the system. When the comfort women finally felt confident and safe enough to step forward and speak out with the beginning of true democracy in South Korea, that story is the story that was chosen as the most damaging to Japan, the story that displays the utter worst of the violence. The comfort women system was without doubt a transgression against human rights and showcased the worst of humanity. However, ignoring the many different sides of the story in favor of nationalistic saber rattling invalidates the multiple experiences of these women.

---

<sup>110</sup> Soh, The Comfort Women, 185.

As discussed above, the Japanese were not the sole perpetrators in the comfort system. Many Koreans were complicit, whether out of greed or coercion, and were often the ones to beat and abuse the comfort women at the stations they ran. This is rarely mentioned by humanitarian activists. The stories of those like Kim Sun-dōk (Kim Tōkchin), who kept in touch with one of her clients even after the war was over, are rarely told. Not only did Kim come to love this man, but he helped her and four others leave the comfort station, arranging for their safe passage all the way back to Korea. She continued to send him gifts throughout the war, and their correspondence only stopped with the cessation of his letters two years before the end of the war, possibly due to his death or disappearance. She kept the letters until they were burned during the Korean War.<sup>111</sup> Such affection and kindness mars the story of continuous and unrelenting abuse that the Korean side of the debate is portraying, and so is rarely heard.

The beginning of this paradigmatic story's creation lies in the buildup to the International Public Hearing Concerning Japan's Postwar Compensation (Nihon no sengo hoshō ni kansuru kokusai kōchōkai) on December 9<sup>th</sup> of 1992, in Tokyo.<sup>112</sup> As Mitsui Hideko points out, "Efforts made by those who have been working in separate realms – historians, international human rights activists, and scholars in international law – converged during this event."<sup>113</sup> This varied group of specialists was attempting to bring the comfort women issue to the international stage and place it on par with other known

---

<sup>111</sup> Howard, 47-8.

<sup>112</sup> Hideko Mitsui, "The Resignification of the "Comfort Women" Through NGO Trials" in Rethinking Historical Injustice and Reconciliation in Northeast Asia: The Korean Experience. Eds. Gi-Wook Shin, Soon-Won Park, and Daqing Yang. (New York: Routledge, 2007) 39.

<sup>113</sup> Mitsui, 41.

human rights violations. They specifically chose which stories to present and focus on, and chose the worst possible experiences to detail. The work of all the specialists involved, then, was geared toward a representational strategy that would “constitute a case worthy of attention in international arenas.”<sup>114</sup> It is natural and unsurprising, then, the tenor that the testimonies chosen would take.

This, however, was the beginning of the prominence of the comfort women issue in South Korea, which coincided with the development of democratic government. Since that time, the succeeding governments after Roh Tae-woo’s tenure have picked up the issue and run with it, using it to fuel the campaign-machine and foreign policy initiatives. If there is one thing that the majority of Koreans can agree on, it is a hatred of the Japanese colonization and all of its ensuing results (except, of course, for the beginning of modernization). This is a fairly recent development.

### The Comfort Women and Japan

Surprisingly, it has been the Japanese who have been most forthcoming with sympathetic scholarship since the end of the war. Soh points out that some books detailing the sufferings of the comfort women became best sellers in Japan in the 1970s.<sup>115</sup> It has only been since the early 1990s that the Neo-Conservative nationalists have raised their hackles and become loudly insistent on Japan’s so-called “normality” and lack of need for apology.

One of the first arguments made was a denial of any involvement with the

---

<sup>114</sup> Mitsui, 41.

<sup>115</sup> Soh, The Comfort Women, 146.

comfort women system by the Japanese government or military. That, however, was blown apart by the discovery of incriminating documents in the archive of the Self Defense Army Library by Professor Yoshimi Yoshiaki in January of 1992. The day immediately following the publication of the documents, on January 12<sup>th</sup>, the Japanese government had no choice but to acknowledge its involvement.<sup>116</sup> Since that time, Japan has issued several apologies, the most well-known of which is the Kōno Statement, issued by Cabinet Secretary Kōno Yōhei in August of 1993, following a governmental investigation into the claims of the comfort women.<sup>117</sup> In his statement, Kōno said,

The then Japanese military was, directly or indirectly, involved in the establishment and management of the comfort stations and the transfer of comfort women. The recruitment of the comfort women was conducted mainly by private recruiters who acted in response to the request of the military. The Government study has revealed that in many cases they were recruited against their own will, through coaxing, coercion, etc., and that, at times, administrative/military personnel directly took part in the recruitment. They lived in misery at comfort stations under a coercive atmosphere....

Undeniably, this was an act, with the involvement of the military authorities of the day, that severely injured the honor and dignity of many women. The Government of Japan would like to take this opportunity once again to extend its sincerest apologies and remorse to all those, irrespective of place of origin, who suffered immeasurable pain and incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women.<sup>118</sup>

This statement, as reproduced in part above, has been the fullest and most satisfactory apology to date. Kōno admitted to the government's involvement in both recruitment and management of the facilities, and apologized directly to the comfort women themselves, acknowledging their individual pain. It also recognized that not all

---

<sup>116</sup> Yoshimi, 35.

<sup>117</sup> Jane W. Yamazaki, Japanese Apologies for World War II: A Rhetorical Study. (New York: Routledge, 2006) 63.

<sup>118</sup> Yamazaki, 64.

damage is physical. As Yamazaki points out, the apology has been labeled as flawed for using the terms “some” and “in many cases” as if the abuse was not universal.<sup>119</sup>

Arguably, however, the statement does not claim that the abuse was not universal; merely that the same tactics were not employed in every case, which is the truth. Whether one takes exception to the use of these words or not, the apology has stood to date as the most well-received and appreciated out of the many that have been issued.

In the intervening years, Japanese politicians, and many Japanese citizens, have taken exception to other aspects of the comfort women’s claims. The issue now has not become whether the Japanese government and military were involved or not, but whether they were involved with forced recruitment, or if that was the sole prerogative of private procurers, many of whom were actually Korean. They point to a lack of evidence supporting the claim that the Japanese government was directly or indirectly involved in coercive recruitment. Those adhering to this argument take a positivist view of history: if there is no official documentation, then there is no proof. Ueno explains, “...official documents are valued more highly than private ones... oral tradition and testimony begins to have credibility only when they are backed up by other forms of proof...Positivist history is centred on documentary historical sources, and views the researcher as an objective outsider.”<sup>120</sup> This view privileges documentary evidence over the testimonies of survivors, and claims to be completely objective because of that. However, it is well known that the Japanese government systematically destroyed documents at the end of the war, before the arrival of the Occupation Army. It is

---

<sup>119</sup> Yamazaki, 64.

<sup>120</sup> Chizuko Ueno, Nationalism and Gender. Trans. Beverley Yamamoto. (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2004) 115.

unsurprising that incriminating evidence is difficult to find now, but that does not mean that it did not once exist, nor that its lack of existence disproves the testimonies of the women. Furthermore, as Ueno also mentions, official documentation is the product of bureaucracy.<sup>121</sup> Official government documents are then the government's interpretation and report of events and are not in themselves objective either. So the outcry against a lack of evidence is in many ways a futile argument.

A further claim entered into the contentious debate is that Japanese women were also comfort women. It was not merely other ethnicities that suffered, and it certainly was not about racial discrimination. On the surface, this argument seems valid. However, Japan had a long established history of legalized prostitution. The state controlled prostitution, doling out licenses and requiring medical checkups. Also, the *karayuki-san*, traveling prostitutes, were widespread: "In the late nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth, Japanese traveling prostitutes or *karayuki*, were to be found in many parts of Asia, including areas which later became Japanese-occupied territories. The export of women for sexual service was therefore not a new idea for the Japanese."<sup>122</sup>

The difference between these women and their Korean counterparts is that the Japanese women actually were prostitutes to begin with, unlike the young Korean girls who were coerced into service. The Japanese women often went willingly for the chance to get out of their contracts and find employment with better pay.<sup>123</sup> They were older than

---

<sup>121</sup> Ueno, 116.

<sup>122</sup> Hicks, 27.

<sup>123</sup> Hicks, 38.

their non-Japanese companions and frequently carried venereal diseases themselves, making the young and virginal Koreans the preferred choice, and the less expensive one. That is not to say, of course, that the Japanese comfort women did not also suffer. Despite their profession being legalized in their native country, they still suffered ostracism. As Ueno states: "...the family itself was the stronghold where the masculinity of the soldiers of the Imperial Army was defined. In its shadow were the military comfort women who were forced to carry the burden of 'whorishness' as opposed to motherhood..."<sup>124</sup> The Japanese women were equally forced to give up their independence and use their bodies to serve their patriarchal nation, sacrificing for the good of their country. This abuse of patriarchal power continues today when the Japanese government issues its response that the comfort women were just prostitutes. Their profession does not excuse the abuse they suffered, neither does it mean that sexual slavery did not take place, and it does not make rape an impossible proposition simply because they were paid, though in most cases they never saw the money they supposedly earned. However, once again, the gender of the victims is utilized against the victims themselves as their suffering is deemed less because they were forced into a role in which a "normal" woman would be ashamed to find herself.

As these debates continue back and forth, the issue has become increasingly polarized in Japan with people taking one of two sides: those in support of the claims of the comfort women and those who believe apologies have already been made and that those apologies were damaging to Japan's national pride anyway. Those such as Kobayashi Yoshinori, a cartoonist and right-wing spokesperson, speak out against what

---

<sup>124</sup> Ueno, 48.

they term a “masochistic” view of history, viewing “‘leftists,’ ‘intellectuals,’ ‘individualists,’ ‘cultists,’ and, above all, ‘the media’”<sup>125</sup> as responsible for the so-called treachery. The fight continues over national history textbooks (which are outside the scope of this paper but which add fuel to the debate) and how much should be said about the comfort women. Those of Kobayashi’s ilk would prefer none at all.

Neo-Conservatives are bent on eliminating any mention of the comfort women from history textbooks, claiming that any mention of the comfort system in middle school texts is not age appropriate and that bringing up such an unsavory past dishonors Japan and creates a negative self-image for young Japanese. Naturally, this has enraged Korea and China, as well as other Asian countries who suffered under Japanese colonial rule, and the redaction and ignorance of these historical facts in favor of patriotic flag-waving has caused old animosities to bubble over from the simmer at which they constantly remain.

### Recanting the Yoshida Seiji Articles and Dismissing Comfort

#### Women’s Testimony

All these debates have been brought to the fore again with the retraction of a series of articles written by the *Asahi Shimbun* concerning the memoirs of Yoshida Seiji. In early August of 2014, the comfort women issue suffered a cutting setback in Japan as one of the last remaining left-leaning news sources (left-leaning being entirely relative, as the Japanese left is not very far off center), the *Asahi Shimbun*, published a retraction of former articles predicated on the testimony of Yoshida Seiji, a former Armed Forces

---

<sup>125</sup> Alexis Dudden, Troubled Apologies Among Japan, Korea, and the United States. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008) 57.



member. Yoshida had admitted to kidnapping over 200 women for the purpose of servicing comfort stations. Although his account had already been proven false, the paper had not renounced its stories.<sup>126</sup> The *Yomiuri Shimbun*, the *Asahi*'s rival paper, published its own maliciously joyful article covering the renouncement, which will be discussed here.

At the time of the initial publication of Yoshida's story, a member of the Japanese Imperial Army coming forward and openly discussing the forcible recruitment methods of the military was shocking, standing in direct opposition to the government's claims of total innocence with regard to the establishment of comfort stations. Though the comfort women's stories were slowly being brought to light throughout the seventies and eighties, they had had little noticeable impact. It was not until the early nineties and the emergence of humanitarians concerned with international human rights violations, as discussed above, that the comfort women themselves began to step forward and protest their treatment both during and after the war. Along with these women's brave testimonies, Professor Yoshimi Yoshiaki and his discovered documents of direct government and military involvement in the setting up and maintenance of comfort stations throughout Japan's occupied territories, beginning with the Sino-Japanese war in the thirties and continuing through the Asia-Pacific War, forced the Japanese government to admit its involvement.

However, there still remains some contention surrounding the issue. As discussed above, while the government admits to creating and maintaining the stations, it continues to insist that any coercion was committed by private brokers and not the military itself.

---

<sup>126</sup> Reiji Yoshida, "Asahi Shimbun Admits Errors in Past 'Comfort Women' Stories," *The Japan Times*, August 5, 2014, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2014/08/05/national/politics-diplomacy/asahi-shimbun-admits-errors-in-past-comfort-women-stories/#.VFq-Lxbp-nI>.

Yoshida's memoir contradicted this stance, making it difficult to maintain.

With his second term as Prime Minister, Abe Shinzō has pushed to mitigate the responsibility of Japan for war time atrocities. He is among the camp of Neo-Conservatives who believe that the discussion of these atrocities detracts from Japan's national pride and would like to have all mention of the comfort women wiped entirely from the slate. It is understandable that he would feel that way, considering he is the grandson of Class A war criminal and former prime minister Kishi Nobusuke.<sup>127</sup> Unsurprisingly, the conservative media tends to side with him, as evidenced by the vitriolic editorial of the *Yomiuri Shimbun* on the *Asahi's* retraction.

In the very first sentence, the article already clearly demonstrates on which side of the issue the paper stands, terming the women "so-called comfort women."<sup>128</sup> This skeptical tone could either be taken to address the euphemistic "comfort" portion of the term, a word used to imply the women's function as providing sexual "comfort" to the troops and obscuring the true violent nature of their service; or, it could be emphasizing skepticism about the survivors' service as a whole. Given the stance of the rest of the article, and the *Yomiuri Shimbun* as a news source, the editorial is more likely directing doubt toward the women themselves. It goes on to state that the *Asahi* has retracted its statements "albeit partially,"<sup>129</sup> implying that the *Asahi* actually has much more to retract and apologize for, indicating the supposedly shoddy nature of their reporting.

The *Yomiuri* laments that the *Asahi's* reporting has caused international

---

<sup>127</sup> Dudden, 85.

<sup>128</sup> Yoshida, "Asahi Shimbun Admits Errors in East 'Comfort Women' Stories."

<sup>129</sup> "Asahi Shimbun Makes Long-Overdue Corrections Over 'Comfort Women,'" *The Japan Times*, October 2, 2014, <http://www.the-japan-news.com/news/article/0001478078>.

misperception of Japan and has aggravated the ill-feelings between Japan and South Korea (the relationship with North Korea is also tense, but for a slew of other reasons in addition to the comfort women issue). The strained relationship with South Korea, however, is not due to Yoshida or the *Asahi*'s reporting. South Korea has a number of reasons to distrust and dislike Japan, stemming from Japan's annexation of the peninsula. The comfort women issue began to become a major part of the discussion between the two countries in the early nineties, coinciding with the publication of Yoshida's memoirs and the publication of *Asahi*'s articles, it is true, but Yoshida was not the reason the issue became prevalent. Rather, it was a shift in international perception of violence against women and war time rape. Women began to speak out about the injustices they suffered. To claim that Yoshida and the *Asahi Shimbun* were instrumental in the formation of the world's perception of Japan is to ignore the efforts and struggles of comfort women survivors and women's rights activists, thereby attempting to invalidate all the work they have put in to the comfort women issue. Furthermore, Yoshida is far from the only one to testify to the forcible recruitment of comfort women; but, he was a part of the military, male, and Japanese, and so his confessions carried more weight to the Japanese. Being able to negate his statements means that the Japanese Right is once again free to sweep the comfort women under the rug.

Yoshida's remarks in a global context are once again brought up in reference to Radhika Coomaraswamy's report to the UN Human Rights Commission, known simply as the Coomaraswamy Report, seeming to also invalidate Coomaraswamy's conclusions. Yoshida was certainly not the only voice to be raised in this report, and it is a logical fallacy to assume that just because Yoshida's contribution has proven inaccurate that the

rest of the report does not hold merit. The entire *Yomiuri* article, in fact, suffers from this fallacy, crowing in triumph over the retraction of one man's contribution and ignoring the numerous other documents and testimony to the same effect.

Later in the article, the *Yomiuri* points out the problem with the conflation of the Women's Voluntary Service Corps (termed in the article simply as "female volunteer corps") and the comfort women. The *Asahi* does make a mistake here, though the mistake is in claiming that the two are "completely different"<sup>130</sup> in their retraction. While it is true that not all Voluntary Service Corps members were made into comfort women, it is also true that there were those who were told they were joining the Corps to find work in factories and similar occupations, but were taken to comfort stations. As George Hicks states: "The Women's Voluntary Service Corps was ostensibly (and, to some extent, actually) directed towards labour service in essential war industries. The women were, however, sometimes diverted into prostitution and the Women's Voluntary Service Corps became so identified with it that the women who actually did work in factories have been reluctant to acknowledge their membership of the Corps."<sup>131</sup> It is essential to recognize the difference between regular Service Corps members used solely for labor and those forced into prostitution, as discussed above, but it is also critical that it be remembered that the Service Corps sometimes stood as a mask for the recruitment of comfort women. Deception is, after all, a form of coercion. If the *Yomiuri* can claim that the two were "completely different," then they can maintain that forced recruitment for sexual slavery did not take place.

---

<sup>130</sup> "Asahi Shimbun Makes Long-Overdue Corrections Over 'Comfort Women.'"

<sup>131</sup> Hicks, 52.

In the penultimate section of the article, the *Yomiuri* points out the *Asahi*'s statements that "great importance must be attached to the fact that those women were caught in a situation marked by 'a coercive nature' with which they had been "deprived of freedom."<sup>132</sup> The article argues that the use of women to satiate Japanese soldier's sexual needs and the question of military involvement in forcible recruitment are separate issues, which is blatantly untrue. One cannot exist without the other, and one happened due to the perceived necessity of the other. They are inextricably tied. The article's attempt to dismiss the *Asahi*'s concern for the forced retention of the women at the comfort stations is also ignoring reality. There are numerous stories of women attempting to flee and being beaten, or, at worst, killed. In many cases, the women were not allowed to move out of their compound, and when they were, it was at certain times and under supervision. To disregard the coercive nature of these women's experiences is to dismiss the testimony and suffering of these women. However, that is exactly what the government wants.

Abe Shinzō has already publicly considered withdrawing the Kōno Statement. Abe's remarks caused deep concern in not only South Korea, but in China and all over Asia as well, as most areas under occupation were forced to participate in Japanese war time activities, the women made into prostitutes and the men into soldiers. The uproar caused him to backpedal, and to date no retraction has been made, but the fact that he would even consider making such a statement is proof of his stance toward the comfort women. If he could erase their testimonies, he would.

The article concludes that though the relationship with South Korea is strained, the South Korean president, Park Geun-Hye, is not going to back down and so neither

---

<sup>132</sup> "Asahi Shimbun Makes Long-Overdue Corrections Over 'Comfort Women'."

should Japan. The issue here is the weight of the evidence against Japan. The article calls for accurate history, as if all the proof of complicity and coercion on the part of the government was somehow fabricated, despite coming from the Self-Defense Agency's own library. Neo-Conservatives are not merely burying their heads in the sand; they are trying to rewrite history from atop their soapbox and convince the rest of Japan that history as the rest of the world understands it is simply false and denigrating to national pride. This is nationalism at its horrible best, placing the pride of a country's image before recognizing historical mistakes and sincerely apologizing for past actions, that those mistakes may never again be made.

What Neo-Conservatives also fail to recognize is that the negation of one man's testimony does not immediately falsify all other testimonies to the same effect. As the *Yomiuri* and other right-wing sources cheer over false memoirs, they conveniently forget the many comfort women who have stepped forward to tell their tales. Of course, it is easy to dismiss them as simply looking for a pay-out, especially when testimonies change in the minor details. However, memory is not perfect after age and emotional turmoil have taken their toll. Even in their minor changes, the testimonies' main points still stand: women were frequently, but not always, deceived and coerced into sexual servitude, either with promises of better jobs or better lives or by simple force, sometimes with the lives of their families at risk.

While the Yoshida retraction is a setback for the movement to extract a sincere apology and reimbursement from the Japanese government, it is a setback only in that the right-wing nationalists now have a concrete, well-known testimony to point to and demonstrate is a falsification. It does not mean anything for the countless other stories

and testimonials given, although, as with all politics, one needs only spin a single event to convince an uninformed reader that your truth is their truth. In the minds of those reading or hearing the news articles on the *Asahi*'s retraction, this throws shadows of doubt on other known testimonials.

More crucially, the importance given to Yoshida's testimony and its subsequent disavowal further embroils gender identity in the issue. Yoshida was a Japanese male soldier; the victims are Korean women. Yoshida's testimony was so powerful in the first place because of his gender and ethnicity. The fall of his legitimacy (despite being earlier discredited in 1992 by Hata Ikuhiko),<sup>133</sup> therefore, became a far more serious problem than if one of the comfort women had been proven false. They are already under constant doubt and scrutiny due to the nondocumentary nature of their testimony and the accusations of fraud hurled at them by the Japanese conservatives. Yoshida's falsehood was held up above the testimonies of the victims themselves and its renunciation is also equally more valuable to opponents of the comfort women.

The gender of the victims does matter because the abuse they suffered would not have happened to males. The systematic oppression experienced by women in both South Korea and Japan allowed for their signification as objects for sexual release rather than as persons in their own right with their own identities and desires. This oppression has continued today as their stories are not used to obtain the compassion, understanding, acknowledgment, and compensation they deserve. Rather, their testimonies are denied or dismissed by the Japanese government. The South Korean government ignores its own wrongdoing and that of its citizens in favor of politicizing the issue to build anti-Japanese nationalism and capture voters. It is not about the women, but about what the women's

---

<sup>133</sup> Soh, The Comfort Women, 152.

testimonies can do to further their political agenda. It is also not about finding truth in history, but about how the truths that are known can be spun to serve that political agenda. These women, the few who remain, are being used once again by largely male-dominated governments. It is not enough that their bodies and lives have been irreparably damaged; even their bids for compensation have been hi-jacked for purposes outside of their own peace of mind.

The renunciation of Yoshida Seiji's memoirs and any articles connected to them in the *Asahi Shimbun* will prolong the struggle even further. It was already unlikely that any of these women would see the apology they seek in their lifetimes, and that goal has become even further away as the Japanese Neo-Conservatives retrench. The lack of a history that acknowledges all parties' wrongdoings and faces the horror of the comfort women system head on continues to prevent any meaningful dialogue between the Japanese and the South Korean governments. Not all comfort women were coerced. Not all comfort women suffered debilitating abuse. Not all comfort women had unmitigated hatred and terror for the Japanese. Yet, the Japanese were deeply involved in all aspects of the comfort station system, and abused the comfort women to such a degree that the bodies and minds of many of these women are permanently damaged. Many Koreans were complicit in the system and just as abusive as the Japanese. Until the patriarchal governments of these two countries stop attempting to use the female experiences of the Asia-Pacific War to drive their own nationalism and agendas, and recognize that all history is not simply cut and dry, right and wrong, and that fault can lie with many parties without dismissing outlier testimonies, the few remaining comfort women will never see the resolution and peace that they seek.



## CONCLUSION

Korean women have been struggling against patriarchal oppression since the latter half of the Chosŏn dynasty. Many fought silently, if they fought at all, taking whatever power they could in the home but never raising their voices publicly. With the advent of public education, however, women began to demand emancipation from the patriarchal structure and the right to decide their own lives. Their education as understood by males, unfortunately, was not for the purpose of true liberation, but for the good of the nation; they were to remain in the private sphere, just more educated and better able to produce proper citizens of the nation. This was certainly not the first use of women to serve a political agenda, and it was not the last.

When women did begin to call for their liberation, the discourse of women's movements was co-opted by nationalists. Women's liberation was viewed as selfish and took away from the goal of freeing the nation. Once the nation was freed, women would be freed, and so they should work toward national liberation rather than their own personal liberation. Women who refused to relinquish their own ambitions and took the ideals of modernity to heart were denigrated as vapid whores and sexualized by males and in the media to delegitimize their behavior. They were easily dismissed, which allowed the patriarchy to bring back the Old-Fashioned Woman, a woman who knew her place in the home and would quietly serve to create the good sons that men desired.

Once women's minds had been appropriated by the state, their bodies fell subject

to invasive policies. Women were expected to multiply, regardless of the dangers to their health. Furthermore, many women were forced out of the home to find wage work to supplement their family incomes. Even those who left home to find independence and individual freedom suffered greatly for their ambition, either laboring under harsh labor conditions for little pay where they were kept in confinement under intense surveillance, or deceived into becoming comfort women. The Japanese colonial government used their bodies for cheap and expendable labor in their rapid industrialization of the peninsula and in the process, destroyed many of them. Korean men were often complicit in labor schemes such as these, many serving as foremen and managers at Japanese factories.

Women's bodies were also used in sexual labor under the comfort system, where they suffered physical and mental abuse and were often scarred for life. The tragedy of these women is that they were shamed for their abuse when they returned home, and are being shamed for it now. They were ignored for decades and when they did finally come forward to testify, they were called liars and profiteers. Thankfully, their stories are being told now, but not all of their stories. Once again, a political agenda has warped these women's intentions and taken from them the meaning of their struggles as some stories that do not fit the paradigm activists are trying to portray are being ignored or silenced.

It is horrendous to think that women's minds, bodies, and histories are still being appropriated for political agendas. Many parts of colonial history are left in shadow as Korean men and the Korean government at large cover up the roles they played during colonization. They have gone over history with a brush to paint over that which makes them uncomfortable or does not fit their paradigm of ultra-nationalism and constant struggle for liberation. Women's history has lost out in this repainting, only those

women's lives which fit the story seeing the light of day. The comfort women are a highly visible example of this. It is incumbent upon historians and the governments of the countries involved to recognize their own history, no matter how difficult or shameful it may be. Women, past and present, have suffered long enough, and their lives should not be rewritten to serve a political agenda.

## REFERENCES

- “Asahi Shimbun Makes Long-Overdue Corrections Over ‘Comfort Women’.” *The Japan Times*. 2 Oct 2014. Yomiuri Shimbun. Web. 22 Oct 2014. <http://www.the-japan-news.com/news/article/0001478078>
- Caprio, Mark. *Japanese Assimilation Policies in Colonial Korea, 1910-1945*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009. Print.
- Choi, Chungmoo. “Nationalism and Construction of Gender in Korea.” *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*. Eds. Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi. New York: Routledge, 1998. 9-31. Print.
- Choi, Kyeong-Hee. “Neither Colonial nor National: The Making of the “New Woman” in Pak Wansŏ’s “Mother’s Stake 1”.” *Colonial Modernity in Korea*. Eds. Gi-wook Shin and Michael Robinson. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999. 221-247. Print.
- Dudden, Alexis. *Troubled Apologies Among Japan, Korea, and the United States*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. Print.
- Hicks, George. *The Comfort Women: Japan’s Brutal Regime of Enforced Prostitution in the Second World War*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994. Print.
- Howard, Keith ed. *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women*. New York: Cassell, 1995. Print.
- Kim, Janice C. H. (2001). *Gender, Labor, and Political Consciousness: Female Factory Workers in Colonial Korea*. Ph.D. Thesis. University of London: England.
- Kim, Janice C. H. “The Pacific War and Working Women in Late Colonial Korea.” *Signs* 33.1 (2007): 81-103. Web.
- Mitsui, Hideko. “The Resignification of the “Comfort Women” Through NGO Trials.” *Rethinking Historical Injustice and Reconciliation in Northeast Asia: The Korean Experience*. Eds. Gi-Wook Shin, Soon-Won Park, and Daqing Yang. New York: Routledge, 2007. 36-54. Print.

- Moon, Seungsook. "Begetting the Nation: The Androcentric Discourse of National History and Tradition in South Korea." *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*. Eds. Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi. New York: Routledge, 1998. 33-66. Print.
- Silverberg, Miriam. *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006. Print.
- Soh, Sarah. "Aspiring to Craft Modern Gendered Selves." *Critical Asian Studies* 36.2 (2004): 175-198. Web.
- Soh, Sarah C. *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. Print.
- Sorensen, Clark W. "The Korean Family in Colonial Space – Caught between Modernization and Assimilation." *Colonial Rule and Social Change in Korea: 1910–1945*. Eds. Hong Yung Lee, Yong-Chool Ha, and Clark W. Sorensen. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013. 314-334. Print.
- Suh, Jiyoung. "The 'New Woman' and the Topography of Modernity in Colonial Korea." *Korean Studies* 37 (2013): 11-43. Web.
- Ueno, Chizuko. *Nationalism and Gender*. Trans. Beverley Yamamoto. Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2004. Print.
- Wells, Kenneth M. "The Price of Legitimacy: Women and the Kūnuhoe Movement, 1927-1931." *Colonial Modernity in Korea*. Eds. Gi-wook Shin and Michael Robinson. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999. 191-220. Print.
- Yamazaki, Jane W. *Japanese Apologies for World War II: A Rhetorical Study*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- Yoo, Theodore Jun. *The Politics of Gender in Colonial Korea: Education, Labor, and Health, 1910-1945*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008. Print.
- Yoshida, Reiji. "Asahi Shimbun Admits Errors in Past 'Comfort Women' Stories." *The Japan Times*. 5 Aug. 2014. Web. 21 Oct. 2014.  
<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2014/08/05/national/politics-diplomacy/asahi-shimbun-admits-errors-in-past-comfort-women-stories/#.VFq-Lxpb-nI>
- Yoshimi, Yoshiaki. *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II*. Trans. Suzanne O'Brien. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995. Print.